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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 001256

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TAGS: PREL PGOV NI

SUBJECT: ITSEKIRI CHIEF AWAITING DEVELOPMENT DESPITE
FEUDING POLITICIANS

Classified By: Consul General Brian L. Browne for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Prominent Itsekiri Chief Hope Harriman told the Consul General on September 18 that the State and Federal government had done little to revitalize Warri, the economic center of Delta State and traditional home of the Itsekiri. Harriman inveighed against Chevron for failing to honor its MOU with the Itsekiri community, especially the promise to construct a housing area and a business park. Saying he had good relations with Ijaw Chief Edwin Clark, Harriman did not foresee a repeat of the 2003 ethnic clashes that crippled Warri. However, he warned that the Itsekiri had stockpiled weapons as insurance in case of Ijaw aggression. On the national scene, he characterized both President Obasanjo and Atiku as corrupt and hoped both would be jettisoned from office as a result of their latest feud. END SUMMARY.

ITSEKIRI REMAIN ARMED, STILL WAITING FOR DEVELOPMENT

¶2. (C) During a September 18 discussion with the Consul General in Warri, Itsekiri Chief Harriman commented that Warri was economically stagnant. Despite the fact that oil comes from the southern parts of the state around Warri, neither the state nor federal government has seen fit to pump revenue into the area. Harriman said Delta state Governor Ibori, who is part Urhobo, part Itsekiri, has forgotten the Itsekiri portion of his lineage. Whatever development efforts the Governor has undertaken have focused on Urhobo, Harriman groused. Despite the significant funds allocated to it, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) has been ineffective in realizing its mandate, fustigated Harriman. However, it has been a generous trough from which venal politicians have enriched themselves, he continued. To stop this, he suggested the NDDC be forced to partner with the United Nations and other international development agencies to ensure NDDC funds get used for the purpose intended.

¶3. (C) As a result of the lack of development, Warri was now crowded and impoverished. He stated that more land needed to be opened up and bridges built to areas people could inhabit in order to relieve the congestion and facilitate business development. In this regard, he gave partial credit to Governor Ibori for beginning to construct a bridge linking Warri with an outlying area. The problem was the bridge was being constructed in the wrong place, lamented Harriman. It leads to a graveyard and an area that can not be put to much use, he declared.

¶4. (C) Chevron also emerged as a culprit in Harriman's expostulations. He recounted that Chevron signed an MOU with the Itsekiri (the Chevron Escravos facility is located on traditional Itsekiri land) to construct housing and a business park to promote local small businesses. He said Chevron cleared the ground for the project but thereafter abandoned it. This breach has left the Itsekiri bitter and disappointed, stressed Harriman. He also upbraided the oil companies for discriminating against Warri locals in their hiring and in contracting for basic services like cleaning and office supplies. Most of the oil company personnel who are Nigerian are either Yoruba or Ibo, he claimed. They make sure new opportunities go to their kith, thus leaving qualified Itsekiri and Ijaws in the cold, bemoaned Harriman.

¶5. (C) Despite the economic stagnation in Warri, Harriman downplayed the prospects for repetition of the 2003 ethnic violence that displaced thousands of Itsekiri and resulted in significant damage to Chevron's facilities. Both Ijaws and Itsekiris realized that fighting was economically counterproductive, he explained. Harriman also professed to having a good relationship with Ijaw leader Edwin Clark which they are using to defuse tension between the groups. Nonetheless, Harriman claimed to have purchased weapons to help the Itsekiri defend themselves during the 2003 melee. As insurance, the Itsekiri have kept the weapons in good working order in case of Ijaw encroachment, he boasted.

ABUJA: NOW AND LATER

¶6. (C) Turning to the national scene, Chief Harriman referred to Obasanjo and Atiku's fight as "very unfortunate." Harriman looked at both Obasanjo and Atiku as entirely

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dispensable, hoping the latest maelstrom would jettison both from office via a dual impeachment process. The Itsekiri leader considered Obasanjo's anti-corruption campaign balderdash. The father of National Assembly representative Temi Harriman, he stated his daughter was offered 50 million naira bribe to vote for Obasanjo's third term extension. He threatened to disown her if she voted for Obasanjo, Harriman joked. Calling Obasanjo a "stark illiterate," Harriman claimed Obasanjo was a corrupt military head of state and was even more benighted now. Harriman claimed Obasanjo has exploited government agencies such as the export promotion council to unduly enrich himself. The council was intended to give Nigerian exporters financial incentives but heretofore, Obasanjo and a few of his cronies have been the only ones to win export grants, according to Harriman. Obasanjo's Ota chicken farm is exporting significant amounts of eggs to Liberia and other West African countries and is getting handsome grants from the Export Council to do so, accused Harriman.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) A well versed and well placed traditional ruler and businessman, Chief Harriman's views on economic development in the Delta, particularly in Warri, have some credence. We were a bit surprised at his animosity against Chevron and will endeavor to get the company's perspective on the controvertible MOU. Warri was quiet but not calm during our visit. The air was tense and the ingredients that led to the 2003 outbreaks are ever present. Consequently, other interlocutors were not as roseate as Harriman about the prospects for tranquility. Nonetheless, Harriman may be overconfident about his ability to keep a lid on things. Regarding the verbal fusillades between the President's camp and the Vice President's, Harriman's contempt for both men was representative of much of what we heard in Warri. However, his proposed remedy of a dual impeachment was a

minority view and one that even he saw as unlikely. END
COMMENT.
BROWNE